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AUTHOR Holden, George W.; Ritchie, Kathy L.
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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to look for patterns of parental behavior by assessing styles of child rearing in a novel way--through responses on an interactive computer program simulating an average day in the life of a mother and a preschooler. Presented to each subject (39 mothers of preschoolers and a control group of non-mothers) were 30 common child rearing problems to which subjects selected a response. Response options were designed to reflect authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and uninvolved patterns. Nulliparous women responded to a fictive child, described to half the group as male. No consistent patterns of responses were subsequently detected: both mothers and non-mothers selected responses characteristic of the three basic child rearing patterns, often in equal proportions. Mothers responded differently from non-mothers on one-third of the questions. Results indicate that a simple typology of parental behavior may be inaccurate and suggest that parental behavior is flexible and modifiable, and that differences in maternal styles of child rearing are more subtle than had previously been described in the literature. (RH)

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PATTERNS OF MATERNAL BEHAVIOR--REVISITED

George W. Holden & Kathy L. Ritchie

Department of Psychology
University of Texas
Austin, TX 78712

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Patterns of Maternal Behavior--Revisited

One of the most fundamental questions in developmental psychology concerns how parents influence the cognitive, social, and personality development of their offspring. In order to address that question, an understanding of the nature and characteristics of parental behavior is necessary.

Systematic efforts to analyze and quantify the characteristics of parental behavior began with dimensions of parenting. Becker (1964), for example, differentiated two orthogonal dimensions of control (permissive vs. restrictive) and warmth (warm vs. hostile). Baumrind (1971) integrated these dimensions with her well-known tripartite patterns of parenting. Based on varying amounts of control or demandingness and warmth or responsiveness, she identified the three major patterns of parental behavior as Authoritarian (subsequently referred to as Authori-TARIAN for clarity's sake), Authoritative (Authori-TATIVE), and Permissive, along with five subpatterns (Baumrind, 1971). In a recent revision, Maccoby and Martin (1983) suggested that to complete Baumrind's conceptualization of the dimensions of demandingness and responsiveness, a fourth parenting type of Uninvolved should be included.

Other investigators have taken a different approach for understanding parental behavior. Rather than focus on parental traits or orientation toward parenting, some psychologists have called for a more bidirectional view of parental behavior (e.g., Lewis, 1981) and one that incorporates a more situation specific approach (e.g., Grusec & Kuczynski, 1980). In view of those reports, this study was designed to reassess Baumrind's model of parents, along with Maccoby and Martin's revision, and to see whether maternal behavior could be consistently classified into a parental behavior category. In addition, to see whether the

experience of parenting influenced the level of consistency of responses, a group of nulliparous women were included.

Method

Thirty-nine mothers (mean age = 36 years) of preschoolers (mean age = 4 years) and 62 nulliparous women (means age = 20 years) served as subjects. Sixty-seven percent of the mothers had at least a college education; two mothers had not completed high school. All of the non-mothers were currently enrolled in college. Thirty-six percent of the mothers were employed full-time outside the home and 26% were employed part-time. All but one of the mothers were married; 75% of their husbands were college educated. Nineteen of the preschoolers were males; 24 were firstborn.

For both the mother and the non-mother groups, the procedures were the same. All subjects came to the psychology laboratory to go through a computer program developed by the investigators on a micro-computer (IBM-AT). The program (written in PILOT) is called the "DaySim"; it is an example of a new technique labelled "Computer-Presented Social Situations" (CPSS) developed by the first author (see Holden, 1985, under review). This technique consists of presenting interactive software of common situations as a way of collecting self-reports about behavior and thoughts concerning social interactions. There are a number of advantages of this technique including it is: 1) easy and engaging to use; 2) a confidential and anonymous way of collecting self-report data; 3) a way of accessing cognitive process data, such as problem-solving (Holden & Klingner, in press); and it provides 4) a way to elicit thinking and responses "in action" rather than reflective responses which are subject to more biases.

The DaySim program consists of a series of 30 commonly occurring problems encountered with preschoolers that have been identified in the literature or from maternal reports. To set up the program, the experimenter enters in the name of the target child and a few pieces of information (e.g., the name of a friend of the child) to personalize it and make it more realistic. Instructions inform the subject to respond as she thinks she would if she was in that situation. After each situation is described, a set of four to six responses appears on the monitor. These possible responses were developed to: 1) be realistic; 2) capture the range of possible responses; and 3) fit into one or more patterns of child-rearing. Based on the feedback from 15 mothers of preschoolers, the responses and situations were modified. If none of the responses matched what the subject thought she would do, the subject had the option of typing in her own response. Mothers typed in an average of three responses over the course of the program; non-mothers averaged one. This was a reliable difference (t [99] = 6.63, $p < .001$). Those responses are not included in these analyses.

The first situation presented concerns how the subject would respond when the child was slow in getting out of bed on a weekday; the final problem consisted of the child sneaking out of bed at night. Some situations concerned social interactions, such as how would the subject handle bids for attention. Mothers answered a total of 96 questions; some of these questions dealt with the frequency their children engage in that behavior as well as how the mothers think they would respond to that situation. Only the content of their responses will be dealt with in this paper. The nulliparous women responded to a child named Chris; in half of the cases, Chris was a described as a boy.

Each response option was coded on four 5-point scales. The codings were designed to assess the degree to which that response was typical of each of the four parental patterns. Two raters independently rated the responses; their ratings were highly correlated ($r[190] = .84$, $p < .0001$). When agreements (within one point) over agreements and disagreements were computed, the reliability was .91. Based on the two ratings, a mean score per response (for each of the four ratings) was developed. Each response was then classified as depicting one pattern of response if one of the four ratings was higher than the others. In the cases where two ratings tied for the highest, that response was classified as representing both patterns. To give one example of each response classification, one Authori-TATIVE response included "I would reason with [the child] why it is important ..."; an Authori-TARIAN response was "I would physically carry [the child] to the car"; a Permissive response was "I would ask [the child] to tell me about the picture, even though it interrupts my conversation with my husband"; and an Uninvolved response was "I would let [the child's] father handle it." Based on this coding, 38% of the responses were classified as Authori-TARIAN, 31% were Authori-TATIVE, 27% were Permissive, and 19% were Uninvolved. The number of responses for each of the parenting types selected by each subject was then tallied and divided by the number of questions answered.

Results

For both mothers and nulliparous women, the Authori-TATIVE responses were selected most frequently. Forty-seven percent of the mothers' responses were classified as Authori-TATIVE, as were 56% of the non-mothers' responses. Authori-TARIAN responses were next most frequent (Mothers = 22%; Non-Mothers

- 20%), followed by Permissive (Mothers - 20%; Non-Mothers - 18%), and Uninvolved (Mothers - 11%; Non-Mothers - 6%). .

How consistently did an individual select responses that reflected only one of the four particular patterns? No one selected all or even 90% of their responses from only one category; one mother and one non-mother selected more than 80% from the Authori-TATIVE responses. The median percent of maternal Authori-TATIVE responses was 45%; for non-mothers the median was 56%. Typically, each subject selected some responses from each of the four categories although 26% of the mothers and 39% of the non-mothers sampled from only three of the categories. When looking at the mothers' responses, six sub-groups could be formed on the bases of the percentage of the types of responses made. Figure 1 depicts the response data from these sub-groups. For example, the most common sub-group consisted of the 10 mothers who selected many responses from each four categories (approximately 32% Authori-TATIVE , 28% Authori-TARIAN, 24% Permissive, and 16% Uninvolved responses).

When comparing the mothers and non-mothers in a 2 (parental status) x 2 (sex of child) MANOVA on the percentage of each type of response selected, an overall effect was found for parental status ($F[4,94] = 5.03$, $p < .001$) but not for sex of child or the interaction. Examination of the univariate tests and means indicated that mothers were less Authori-TATIVE ($M_M = 47.1$, $M_{NM} = 56.2$; $F[1,97] = 15.10$, $p < .001$) and more Uninvolved (($M_M = 10.6$, $M_{NM} = 5.8$; $F[1,97] = 14.25$, $p < .001$) than the non-mothers. Figure 2 illustrates the overlapping but consistently higher level of percentage of authori-tative responses selected by non-mothers.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine whether maternal reports of their behavior could be classified consistently into previously established categories of behavior. To assess that, a new methodology labelled Computer-Presented-Social Situations (CPSS) was employed. The major conclusion of the study was that mothers could not be classified readily into Authori-TARIAN, Authori-TATIVE, Permissive, or Uninvolved patterns. Rather, most subjects selected responses to common child-rearing problems from each of the categories. Many subjects selected responses from at least three categories in almost equal amounts.

When a group of nulliparous women answered the same questions, they also selected responses from multiple categories. But in contrast to the mothers, the non-mothers responded with more Authori-TATIVE responses and fewer Uninvolved responses. These findings, indicating that the non-mothers believe they would be more actively involved in interacting with the child, suggest that non-parents have a more naive view of parenting. Mothers, on the other hand, were less "child-centric" in their responses and they kept in mind on-going activities and other needs. The fact that mothers selected 11% of their responses from the Uninvolved category, almost twice as many as the non-mothers did, reflected the mothers' more realistic approach to child rearing rather than an indication that they were uncaring.

What accounts for the differences between these results and Baumrind's typology of parents? One difference is historical. Although Baumrind may have captured current patterns in the late 1960s, those patterns are difficult to find in the 1980s. The current cohort of mothers (and non-mothers) seem to be well aware that the use of reasoning and firm control as captured by the Authori-

TATIVE style is the preferred parenting approach. A second difference is methodological. In the present study, maternal self-reports were assessed from a diverse range of situations. In contrast, Baumrind (1971) based her assessments on parent ratings from a narrow range of contexts--home observations conducted in the evening and interviews. Work is currently underway to assess the validity of the self-report data collected from the CPSS technique. The third possible reason for a difference is that a tripartite (or quadripartite) classification system fails to capture the complexity of parental behavior.

It is clear that the results here do not support the notion of distinct patterns of maternal behavior. Maternal response patterns are hybrids, not pure-breds. Responses over situations and time are an amalgamation of different types of patterns of responses. One mother in some situations may be warm and permissive, while a short time later may be controlling and restrictive due to the exigencies of the context. Furthermore, instead of a trait perspective of parenting, we advocate that an interactional view more accurately represents the nature of parental behavior. Parents behave within situations and to each situation parents bring different histories, needs, expectations, and goals. Added to the situational determinant is the effect of bidirectionality (e.g., Grusec & Kuczynski, 1980). Children also bring to each situation their own experience, needs, expectations, and goals. In sum, parental behavior then is an outcome of the interactive play between the characteristics of the parent, the child, and the situation.

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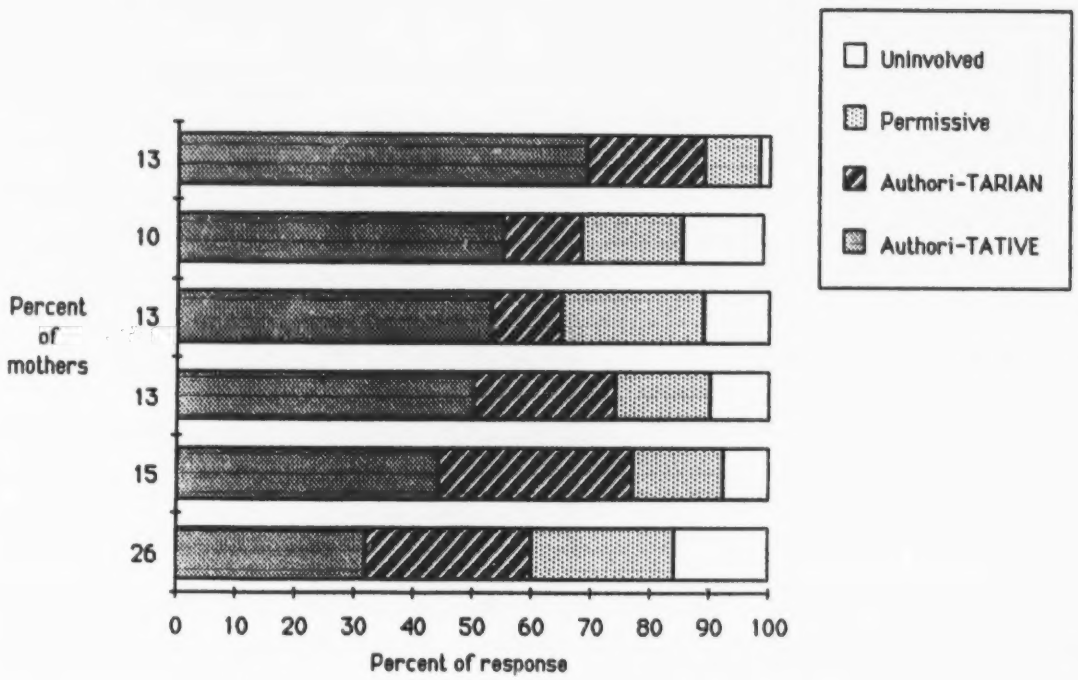

Figure 1. Six "patterns" of maternal responses.

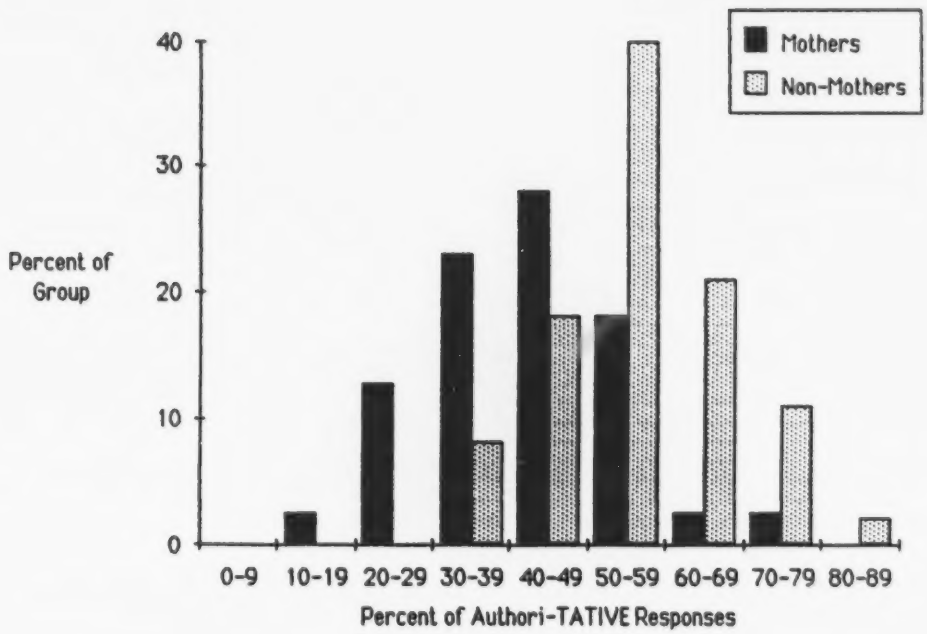

Figure 2. Percent of Authori-TATIVE responses selected by each group.